KVGS-AM AND THE LAS VEGAS REVIEW

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High Rollers' 8-17 September undoes 18-9 August

BY **SONNY PARDO** · KVGS-AM AND THE LAS VEGAS REVIEW

Want to know what this season felt like? Look at two months side by side. August: 18-9. September: 8-17.

On deadline day the front office did what the trade block said it would. Mike Talamante and Darius Valentine went to Rochester. Back came Rochester's 2033 third- and eighth-round picks, Javy Benavides and Danny Sanchez, with Rochester paying a quarter of Benavides's salary. Relievers out, picks in. A seller.

Then the club went out and won. Five straight from August 20 to 24. A walk-off in the 11th against Denver. By the end of the month they had gone 18-9 and were two games out of the last playoff spot, and I asked Eric the obvious question. Did you sell too soon?

September answered it. Eight and 17. Five straight losses from September 6 to 11. They went 1-5 in October and finished 73-89, sixth in the Jade, nine games behind Denver. Benavides made seven starts here with an 8.28 earned run average. Sanchez hit .152. Talamante tore his elbow ligament in Rochester on October 5. So who won the trade? Rochester is in the playoffs. We have two picks, a catcher and a pitcher with an 8.28, and the catcher and the pitcher are both free agents this winter.

Now let me tell you about the man who made this season worth watching, because he is the reason I am not angrier than I am. Don Fraker pitched in 87 games this year, every one of them in relief, and threw 153 1/3 innings. He finished with a 1.94 earned run average, a 0.93 WHIP and 219 strikeouts, 10th in the whole league, and every name above him belongs to a starter. I asked Eric in September what it would take to keep him, with his deal ending. It took three years and $60 million, $20 million a season, starting next year. That is

the best money this front office has spent since I have been covering it, and I have been covering it since 2004.

Eric's plan, which he explained to me in May, is to cap his starters at 18 hitters and win with leverage in the bullpen. Here is how it graded out over a full season. The bullpen threw 836 innings, the most in baseball. The starters threw 618, the fewest, and their 5.32 earned run average was the worst in baseball. The bullpen finished 11th. Eric said in May that the rotation would "keep it close for 3 innings." Sometimes it did. Too often it did not.

Jose Bautista, though. Eric told me in May that Bautista would bounce back and be a solid player. After the deadline Bautista hit .311 with a .376 on-base percentage, and with men in scoring position this season he hit .307. Eric was right about that one. Arturo Molina hit 34 home runs and drove in 98. The club stole 257 bases, second in baseball. Still the most entertaining bad team in the league.

So what does the winter look like? About $38 million comes off the books, and $20 million of that is Ross Colson, who pitched 14 1/3 innings this season. Jose Chavarria and Mark Denton come off, too. About $108 million is already committed for 2033: Molina at $26 million, Fraker at $20 million, J.J. Ellenberg at $18 million, Bautista at $14 million. Leo Advincula is back for two more years.

And there is the farm, which is the one part of this organization I cannot complain about. Five of the six minor-league clubs finished first or second in their divisions. Luxor went 96-36. Tim Lankford, the eighth overall pick in 2025, went 12-2 with a 2.81 earned run average in 25 starts at Mandalay Bay. Bryan Kiestler, this year's first-round pick, hit .347 with 13 home runs at Luxor before he moved over to Mandalay Bay. Eric Archie saved 19 games there with a 1.69 earned run average.

And the league's top 100 prospects? Still not a single High Roller on it. I said in August that it was a good farm team and not yet a farm system. One more summer like this one and I may have to take that back.

What this club needs is the same thing it has needed since I started saying it in May: starting pitchers. The cap is the cap, and Eric is not changing it for me. But somebody has to get those first nine outs, and this year nobody in baseball did it worse.

Back in 2018 this club won 117 games. I know. You have heard it. I will stop saying it when there is a rotation in this town that makes me.