GRAND STRAND SPORTS

OCTOBER 8, 2032 · THE MYRTLE BEACH MERMEN BEAT

Mermen seize final spot, then slip three games short

BY **CRICKET HALLORHAN** · GRAND STRAND SPORTS

Tony Vacchio doubled home the winning run in the 16th inning against San Diego on September 21.

The bullpen had thrown nine and a third scoreless innings to get him there. Six relievers. Nobody scored on any of them.

When it was over, the Mermen were tied for the last playoff spot in the Fire Conference.

Six nights later, after a 5-1 win over Oahu, they had it to themselves, by a game.

In August I wrote that this was not a playoff team yet. It finished three games short, so that held. But on the night of September 27, it was holding a playoff spot.

Then it lost two straight to Oahu. It lost two of three in Mexico City, the last one 7-6 in 10 innings. On October 4 it lost 7-2 in Big Horn, and that was the end of it.

They won the last two anyway. Robby Ayala threw six and two-thirds scoreless innings on the final day, Andy Hummer drove in the only run, and the Mermen beat Big Horn 1-0.

Seventy-nine and 83. Three games short of the 82 wins it took to get in. It is the best record this club has had since it moved here, and 12 wins better than last year.

Let me back up to deadline day.

On deadline day the Mermen were 49-56, five games out, with 12 clubs ahead of them in the conference. Daryl made one trade. Tommy Lee, a player of the week back in April, and Jeremy Moseley went to Kansas City for three draft picks, Kansas City's third- and fifth-rounders next year and its fourth-rounder in 2034, and a teenage outfielder named Chris Malloy.

I know what a trade like that is supposed to mean in August.

It did not mean that here. Bill Sanchez took over at second base, and the club went 30-27 the rest of the way.

Sanchez hit 11 home runs after the deadline. One of them was a two-run walk-off against Spokane on September 17. Another, on September 27, left his bat at 117.9 miles an hour, the hardest-hit home run by anybody in this lineup after the deadline.

The Spokane game was one of four walk-off wins after the deadline, and three of them came between September 17 and 25: Sanchez, Vacchio, and Trent Erickson's single in the 10th against Vancouver.

Jesse Hile was the best hitter on the team over those two months. He hit .290 with 13 home runs and slugged .575, and he finished the year at .296 with 23 home runs.

Remember the 91 home runs I told you about in August, the fewest in baseball? This lineup hit 55 more in the last 57 games. It still finished 30th. It also finished third in on-base percentage and third in stolen bases, with 251, so the singles kept stringing.

Israel Flores, the third baseman Daryl signed in March, finished with 22 home runs, 93 runs batted in and 40 stolen bases.

Steven Alexander struck out 150 in 100 innings, almost all of it in relief.

And people came. The Mermen drew 40,275 a game in September, more than in June, July or August. The three nights against Vancouver at the end of the month were all over 44,000.

At the deadline I asked Daryl whether Chris Breuninger was being traded or kept. Here is the whole answer.

> *"Breuninger has a contract offer out and I expect him to resign with club," he said. "He is part of the plan for the next couple years."*

He signed. Two more years, $10 million a season.

In August I wrote that this club needed Breuninger for another few years, and that I hoped Daryl was having that conversation. He was.

I owe you the other half of what I wrote about him, though. I said he had been wonderful all year and still was. After the deadline he went 2-4 with a 5.07 earned run average in 11 starts. He finished the year 9-8 with a 3.40, still the best earned run average among the starters, and I will take the two years.

I also asked how fast the first pick in the draft would move, and whether we might see Erik Fisher this September. Daryl again, all of it:

> *"He will likely get a promotion soon to AA, if he go on a hot run, we may see him in September. More then likely he will probably not make his debut until next years call up day, after just adding 2B Bill Sanchez and LF Andy Hummer, there isnt alot of room on the roster atm, unless guys get injured, which is always a real possibility."*

He called it. Fisher went to Cypress, in Double-A, and hit .302 with 10 home runs in 39 games. He did not come up in September. Between Tomball and Cypress he hit 21 home runs in 71 games, in his first summer as a professional.

I wrote in August that the next good September in this town would have his name in it. This one was pretty good without it. I am moving my prediction to next year.

Now, the winter.

Jose Ortega and Mark Cobb are free agents. Ortega made $31.1 million this year and reached base at .387. Cobb, the catcher, reached base at .361. Free agency takes about $48 million off the books, and $31 million of that is Ortega.

About $72 million is already committed to next year. The biggest pieces are Kenny Cripps, who saved 35 games and is owed $27.5 million, Flores, who is signed through 2035, and Breuninger's new deal.

Almost everything that made the last two months fun stays. Hile, Sanchez, Erickson, Eric Campbell, Felix Alvarez, Alexander and D.J. Carr are all still under club control.

The holes are the ones you would guess. A catcher. A bat to replace Ortega's on-base percentage. And starting pitching, because the starters' earned run average finished 25th in the league, and the bullpen cannot throw nine and a third every night.

And now the farm, which always gets the last word here.

Three Mermen are on the league's top 100 prospects now, down from six in August. Sanchez is off it because he is a big leaguer now. Hummer, who spent the last two months up here too, is off it as well, and so is Ben Sloan, who hit .235 at Corsicana.

Fisher is seventh. Greg Mullins is 19th, after eight starts at Corsicana with 40 strikeouts in 38 1/3 innings. Melvin Batres, the catcher at Seguin, is 77th, and he hit 14 home runs there.

Chris Malloy, the outfielder from the Kansas City trade, hit .313 with six home runs in 27 games at Seguin.

Tomball went 82-50. Cypress went 79-53.

I was right in August, by three games. Next year I would like to be wrong.