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Taylor felled by career-ending injury; Firebirds keep Morales

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

Mike Taylor took the ball on August 6, four days after the deadline, and somewhere in that start he tore the rotator cuff in his pitching shoulder. The league's injury report called it career-ending. He is 34. He came here in a trade in July of 2026 with a Pitcher of the Year Award already behind him, and he made 14 starts this year in the last season of his contract... and that was the last of them.

I have covered a lot of last starts in 22 years. Most of them, nobody knows they are watching one. That was true of this one too.

So I want to start there, before the standings, because some things are bigger than a standings page and that is one of them.

Now the rest of it.

On deadline day the Firebirds were three games out of the last playoff spot in the Fire Conference, and the front office had put most of its rotation on the trade block. In August I wrote that the list said plainly what nobody had said out loud, that three games was not close enough. The deadline came... and nobody on the list went anywhere.

Robby Morales was on that list. In August I closed by saying it would be a strange and lovely thing if he kept doing what he was doing in this uniform. He did. He made 12 more starts with a 2.97 earned run average, 74 strikeouts and 11 walks. The day after the deadline he threw seven and a third scoreless innings against Montreal, and Javon Kornegay won it 1-0 with a single in the 11th. Morales finished the season 14-7 with a 3.05, 185 strikeouts and 35 walks in 183 innings, and his 0.99 WHIP was sixth-best among the league's qualified starters. Not bad for a man nobody much wanted in January.

Dan Gonzalez finished at 3.23. Juan Samayoa finished at 4.26 and finished hurt.

The club itself went 25-32 after the deadline and finished 76-86, seventh in the Ruby, six games behind the last clubs in. It was 66-79 on September 17, as low as it got all year, and it won 10 of its last 17, a nice way to end a season and nothing more. I have learned that lesson, at least.

The lineup was the lineup. It finished 28th in slugging and 28th in home runs, and with men in scoring position after the deadline it hit .222. Bryce Mosely hit 31 home runs and drove in 93, though after the deadline he hit .168.

Juan Mujica stole 65 bases, third in the league, and reached base at .352. He is 25 and the club controls him, and I like a leadoff man who makes the other team throw to first base all night.

And Jose Zavala... Zavala was going to be a free agent this winter. He is not. He has signed for three more years, $64 million, starting next season. He was a player of the week in the middle of September, and he hit .260 with nine home runs after the deadline, and he has been with this organization since 2018. I am glad he is staying. I have watched him grow up here.

The winter, then... it is mostly about pitching. The free agents take about $50 million with them, and $27.6 million of that is Taylor's. Morales, Gonzalez and Samayoa are all free agents, which is three starters out the door at once if nobody calls them back. About $78 million is already committed to next season: Kyler Baxley at $22.3 million, Zavala at $20 million, Mosely at $18 million and Manny Garcia at $10 million.

The prospects, as I always do, I saved for the end.

Travis Sudduth won two Pitcher of the Year Awards in this uniform, and he spent this summer in Oahu with a 2.47 earned run average. That is how it goes in Phoenix. But the two young players who came back for him when he left are both climbing. The league's prospect list this fall has Casey Morris 34th, up from 60th in August, and Willie Villalba 75th, up from 90th. Tristan Miller is 38th, up from 97th. Victor Calderon is 72nd and Chris Ma is 99th. That is the same five Firebirds as August, all still on it. DSA Reports, in its list dated July 19, had Jay Seabolt 66th and Morris 94th.

Yuma went 78-54 and Wichita went 77-55.

Brendan has run this club since the first day of this league, and he has started over more times than I have written columns about it. This winter he has a rotation to rebuild and money to do it with. I will be there for that too... I always am.