VANCOUVER LEDGER

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Vandals' farm wins five divisions; big club misses by three

BY **SIMON BEAUDRY-NASH** · VANCOUVER LEDGER

BEN WAS RIGHT AGAIN. I am starting to think this is a pattern and I do not know how to feel about it.

In August, with D.J. Bakker on the trade block, I wrote that I hated it and could not tell you it was wrong. Then Ben traded him to Virginia. Ben's explanation, in full, because I owe him that much:

> *"Building a roster isn't about what have you done for me before, or even what have you done for me lately, it's what can you do for me going forward," he said. "DJ's been a reliable starter in his time with us, but at this point in his career at 32 years old he's not going to suddenly become a 3.00 ERA guy consistently. We've had Ken Reifman making AAA hitters look bad all season, and our point of view is for the rest of the season he can give better performances than DJ, so might as well pick up some pieces for the future."*

WHAT CAN YOU DO FOR ME GOING FORWARD. Here is what they did. Reifman made 12 starts for us with a 3.99 earned run average. Bakker made 12 for Virginia with a 4.82. Ben bet on the guy from Triple-A, and the guy from Triple-A won the bet. We paid half of Bakker's salary, a million dollars and a 10th-round pick to make it happen, and three young players came back: Jonathan Stech, Shane Schroeder and Jonathan Sawyer.

So the trade was right. The season still got away.

Because here is the part that HURTS. On August 30 and 31 we were seventh in the Fire Conference. SEVENTH. We were still holding a playoff spot on September 3. Then September went 9-16, with five straight losses from September 15 to 20, and by the time we woke up we were four games out with 10 to play.

And then we went 8-2. We swept Spokane 10-0, 6-0 and 10-2. We swept Oahu to close the season. We won eight of our last 10 games and finished 79-83, three games behind the three clubs that got in at 82-80, and I would like to know where that team was on September 17.

THE CURSE DOES NOT EVEN HAVE THE DECENCY TO BE CONSISTENT.

Ben told me in May the runs would come. They came and stayed. We finished 11th in the league in runs, second in batting average and second in the fewest strikeouts. Kevin Stover hit .317 after the deadline. Tony Bosquez hit .335. Antonio Belanger hit two walk-off home runs, in the 11th against Philadelphia on August 14 and in the 10th against Phoenix on October 2, and Justin Bates hit another against San Diego on September 13.

Adam Bickler struck out 232 batters, SECOND IN THE WHOLE LEAGUE AGAIN, with a 3.74 earned run average over 216 2/3 innings. His record finished 10-10. OF COURSE IT DID.

The rotation behind him was the problem all year and stayed the problem. The starters' earned run average finished 29th. Ryan Wallace, the Pitcher of the Year winner we signed in March for $12 million, finished 8-16 with a 5.88, and he is a free agent now. My editor has asked me to keep what I think about that out of print.

Now the part where I stop yelling.

Our farm is the best thing I have covered in 16 years on this beat. FIVE of our six affiliates finished first in their divisions. White Rock went 96-36. Vernon went 91-41. Kelowna went 88-44. Victoria went 81-51. Kamloops went 48-22. The whole system finished with the second-best combined record in the league.

And some of it got here. Jake DeLong came up in September and hit .341 with seven home runs in 22 games, and if he had been with us all month I genuinely believe we are having a different conversation. He is hurt right now, which, of course. Jarrod Bensel, 11th on DSA Reports' list dated July 19, made two starts up here with a 3.38. Willie Lomeli did not come up. He finished at Kelowna hitting .350 with 14 home runs there and 22 across two levels, and I am going to keep writing his name until he does.

SIX Vandals are on the league's top 100 prospects list: Jeremy Austin 26th, Kyle Gregson 35th, Micah Patterson 36th, Ernie Flores 47th, Roberto Acevedo 51st and Luis Ramirez 53rd. Every one of them moved up since August. And Jeremy Warner, the first-round pick from 2030, finished his summer at Kamloops with a 3.66 over 14 starts.

THE WINTER. Our free agents take about $31 million with them, and Wallace is $12 million of it. Bosquez, who hit .294 this year, is a free agent too, and I would like him back, please. About $56 million is committed to next season: Bickler at $23 million, Alex Carrasco at $14 million, and Belanger, who has signed for four more years. Bob Labbe, Stover, Justin Dora and Jared Littrell are all under club control.

Thirty-two seasons now. Zero championship series. In August I said I had started to think it changes in Kelowna first. I take it back. I think it changes in White Rock and Vernon and Kelowna and Victoria and Kamloops all at the same time, and I think Ben knows it, and I think that is why he keeps being right.
