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Rams keep Williams, lose Sanchez, sign Cardenas at 34

BY **WESLEY TALLGRASS** · SHERIDAN PRESS AND THE WYOMING WIRE

The Rams open in Vancouver tonight, with most of last year's club and one big hole filled by a 34-year-old.

In October I wrote that Nick Williams and Miguel Sanchez were the first two phone calls of the winter, and that if Johnny did not make them somebody else would. He made one of them. Williams, who went 14-8 with a 2.54 earned run average and finished third for Pitcher of the Year, signed back for three years and $70.8 million, with a player option. Sanchez, 11-4 with a 2.22, who threw seven no-hit innings against Mexico City in October, signed with Myrtle Beach for one year and $15 million.

Johnny replaced him with a 34-year-old. Alex Cardenas, who went 15-6 with a 3.31 for Oklahoma City and was worth 5.1 wins, signed for three years and $34.5 million. In March Johnny added Mike Dibrell from Virginia for one year and $9 million. Dibrell won 15 games. Then Juan Samayoa from Phoenix and Chris Kempner, who is 36.

Cardenas is two years older than Sanchez and was worth more last year. The question is the third year, when he is 36.

The rest of the team won the division by one game and stayed whole. Look at what it collected in November. Brad Battiste, Bill Raymond, Josh Ferguson and Brian Freimuth all won the Platinum Stick, four of them on one club. Danny Hess and Ken Christensen won the Great Glove at first base and in center field. Ferguson hit .292 with 30 home runs, was worth 6.6 wins and finished third in the Most Valuable Player vote. Raymond did not win it this time, after three straight. He hit 35 home runs and stole 52 bases anyway, and he

is signed through 2035. Freimuth signed a new five-year deal worth $89 million this winter. John Underwood, who pitched the eighth and ninth innings over and over last October, finished second for Reliever of the Year.

The money is heavy. The payroll is $193.4 million against a budget of $218 million. Hess is the highest paid at $30.5 million, Raymond next at $28 million. Committed beyond this season: $260.7 million.

The farm is thin. Jim Marge, a pitcher, is the only Big Horn name on the game's Top 100 prospect list this morning, at 45th. The Rams pick 26th in the draft.

Spring went 17-13 with five ties.

Two straight division titles and a Mexico City club that put them out of the second round both times. That is the record. Johnny built this to get past that round. The pitching that would have to do it is Williams, Cardenas, Dibrell and a staff that walked fewer batters than any in baseball last year and then walked 19 in five games against Huron.

Vancouver for three. Then Spokane comes to Sheridan on April 1.