KVGS-AM AND THE LAS VEGAS REVIEW

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High Rollers spend $80 million on Tanabe; Bassett goes into the Hall

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

Who was the best position player this franchise ever had? You know the answer. Jason Bassett, 15 seasons in this town, 2,285 hits, 399 home runs, two championships, two Most Valuable Player awards. In February the writers put him in the Hall of Fame on the first ballot, with every vote. Every one. I was in the building for 2018, 117 wins. That was his team.

Now, the team we actually have.

Eric spent the winter on the bullpen, again. Motoshi Tanabe, a reliever, signed for four years and $80 million, $20 million a season, with a player option. Tetsuo Nagata came from Boston for three years at about $4.9 million a year, and Joey Anagnostopoulos from Rochester for two years at $5.5 million. Add Don Fraker and that is four relievers, about $50 million of this year's payroll, and no new starter.

I asked Eric about it. Was the bullpen the problem? Here is most of his answer, and I will give him this: he answered.

> *"Tanabe is as good, or better," he said, comparing him to Fraker. "I plan on using them in 150 high leverage innings a piece. I'll run my openers for 18 batters, and turn the ball over to an army of lights out relievers. Still, I think 82-82 is likely. There was not a lot of option to upgrade my offense, so scoring runs will still be an issue."*

He also told me the press gave him a hard time for pitching Fraker 150 innings out of the bullpen last year, and he pointed out that Fraker won Reliever of the Year. He is right. Fraker threw 153 and a third innings in 87 games, all in relief, with a 1.94 earned run average and 219 strikeouts, and the Ice Conference gave him the award. I wrote in August that his innings told you how often he was being asked to pitch. I still think that. He earned the award anyway.

So here is the plan in plain English. The starters go once through the order, 18 batters. Then Fraker and Tanabe take 150 innings each, the hard ones. Then Nagata, Anagnostopoulos and whoever else. It is a real plan. We are going to find out over 162 games whether it works.

What about the offense? Eric says it, so I will say it: it is the same. The club scored 681 runs last year. Jason Aarsvold hit 26 home runs. Arturo Molina is owed $26 million this year. J.J. Ellenberg is in the last year of his deal at $18 million. The lineup did not get a new bat of any size, and Eric says he looked.

And the farm? Still no High Roller on the game's Top 100 prospect list this morning. Bryan Kiestler, an outfielder who hit 18 home runs in A ball, is first in the system and is in big-league camp. DSA Reports ranked the system 12th in December. The draft, though, went this club's way this week. Las Vegas picked third and took Josh Giffin, a pitcher.

The payroll is $154.9 million against a $200 million budget. Spring went 16-15 with four ties.

What is a good season? Eric says 82 wins. The club won 73 last year. Nine more is a fair ask with that bullpen, and a hard one with that lineup.

We open in Denver tonight, then come home for Galveston. The last time this town had a team worth his company, it had him.