GRAND STRAND SPORTS

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Mermen go "100% win now" with Christensen and Sanchez

BY **CRICKET HALLORHAN** · GRAND STRAND SPORTS

Daryl told me he's all in. His words.

> *"We are looking to compete bigtime this year," he said. "I feel like we are just entering our window and should be competitive going forward."*

And when I asked whether this is a win-now team: "100% In win now mode."

So here's the beach, Opening Day. The Mermen won 79 last year, 12 more than the year before, and missed October by three games. This spring they went 20-10 with five ties, the second-best record in camp.

The winter was pitching, exactly like Daryl said it would be back in October. "Pitching will be the #1 place we spend our money," he told me then.

He did. Mark Christensen, who won 15 games for Rochester and threw 213 innings, signed for two years and $46 million, $23 million a season. Miguel Sanchez, who went 11-4 with a 2.22 for Big Horn and threw seven no-hit innings against Mexico City in October, signed for one year and $15 million. They join Chris Breuninger, who was the most valuable pitcher on the club last year, and Kenny Cripps, the closer, who saved 35 and is in the last year of his deal at $27.5 million.

That's a real rotation now. Christensen, Sanchez, Breuninger. I'll let Daryl pick the order.

Now the part Daryl wanted done that didn't get done. In October he said, "We pretty much have a whole team under control. Only need to add a Catcher and the lineup is set."

The catcher he had, Mark Cobb, left. Cobb signed with Fort Collins this month for four years and $67 million. The catchers in camp now are Julian Samaniego, who hit .208 in 65 plate appearances for New Orleans last year, and a group of veterans who barely played in the big leagues last year. That's the hole. It's a big one for a team that says it's going for it.

The rest of the lineup is the one I've been writing about since summer. Jesse Hile hit .296 with 23 home runs and was the most valuable player on the club. Trent Erickson stole 43 bases and finished third for Rookie of the Year. Israel Flores drove in 93 and is signed through 2035.

And the farm. You know I love the farm. Erik Fisher is seventh on the game's Top 100 prospect list this morning. Greg Mullins is 24th, Melvin Batres 46th and Ben Sloan 85th. This week the Mermen took Christopher Bond, a shortstop, with the eighth pick in the draft. And on the international side the club spent big: Mario Zepeda, a 16-year-old center fielder, for $8.35 million, Long Nguyen-Khoa, a catcher from Laos, for $7.25 million, and Danny Ortiz, another center fielder, for $4.75 million.

A catcher from Laos. I looked it up. He's 16. He won't help this year. I still like it.

The payroll is $142.3 million against a $214 million budget, so there was room for a catcher. Committed beyond this season: just $82.2 million.

San Diego comes to the beach tonight, then the Mermen go to Mexico City and Oahu. Daryl says this is the window. The catcher question comes first.