

HONOLULU STAR-ADVERTISER

MARCH 28, 2033 · THE OAHU PADDLERS BEAT

Esparza goes into the Hall; Paddlers spend $99 million on the bullpen

BY **KAMALEI HOʻOKANO** · HONOLULU STAR-ADVERTISER

Israel Esparza is in the Hall of Fame. The writers voted in February, and every one of them put his name down, in his first year on the ballot. He came to this club at 17 as a throw-in on a trade nobody wrote about, played 17 seasons here, won two Most Valuable Player awards, in 2015 and 2019, and was on the field for the only championship this island has. Four times I had to explain in print that he was not on a ballot yet because he had not been retired long enough. I do not have to explain it anymore.

Jason Bassett went in with him, a Las Vegas man, who spent part of his last season here in 2030. Two plaques with a Paddlers summer in them, from one vote.

The winter itself was spent at the back of the game. Chris Charvet, who pitched in 14 of Somerville's 25 postseason games, signed for three years and $51.6 million. Shane Drew, who saved 44 games for Oklahoma City, signed for three years and $47.5 million. That is almost $100 million on two relievers, both past 30, Drew 35, and $44.7 million of it this season alone.

I asked Paul in Oahu why the money went to the bullpen. His answer was the clearest thing he has told me about the plan in years.

> *"Strong SP prospects are coming up; a year or two away and will be on minimum money," he said. "I wanted to secure the back end too and build around pitching. I have a mid-level offense right now that is good enough if I can build a dominant staff."*

The prospects are real. The game's Top 100 list this morning has nine Paddlers on it, and four of them are in the top 10: Oliver Zimmer third, Gary Walters fifth, Casey Emerson ninth and Carlos Navarro tenth. Zimmer

was the second overall pick last May. Emerson was the first overall pick the year before. Walters struck out 173 batters at High-A last summer. All three are pitchers, and Zimmer and Emerson are in big-league camp. Jonathan Reyes, another starter, is 26th. That is the rotation Paul is waiting for.

Until it arrives, the rotation is Travis Sudduth and whoever is healthiest. Sudduth had a 2.47 earned run average last year and is owed $45.2 million this season. Bill Esposito is 36. Terry Leitch came from Fort Collins for one year and $3.8 million after a 2.97 in 109 innings. Jose Alvares, who made 20 starts last year, will not pitch this season.

The other signing was a catcher, Miguel Chavez, from Galveston, for one year and $8.7 million. Adam Bills, who hit 31 home runs and was worth 4.3 wins, is still the best hitter on the club and is signed for five more years. Jimmy Terry hit 28 and stole 40.

And then I asked about the target. Sixty-four wins in 2031, 77 last year.

> *"We might be around the same target," Paul said, "but maybe we get lucky and make the playoffs if the prospects are ready at call-up day and we're close. The real target is 2034."*

I have been on this beat since the first pitch this franchise ever threw, and I cannot remember Paul naming the year before. He has named it now. This week he added another piece toward it, a center fielder named Brian Guardalabene, with the 12th pick in the draft.

The payroll is $157.7 million against a budget of $216 million. Spring went 11-19 with five ties, and I have seen enough springs here to know what that is worth.

Spokane comes to Oahu tonight, the club that lost 111 games last year, and the club in whose ballpark the seven-game skid began in September. Then Phoenix, then Myrtle Beach. The bullpen is new and expensive. The real team is a year away, and Paul says so himself.