SOUTHLAND TRIBUNE

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Bandits fill roster with one-year veterans, keep nine top prospects

BY **GERALD MABRY** · SOUTHLAND TRIBUNE

By my count Southland signed more than two dozen players this winter. I stopped counting relievers somewhere around the second week of January. Almost every one of them signed for a single season. Kyler Baxley is 36. Eduardo Linares is 36. Carlos Perez is 35. Ben High is 35. B.J. Reyna, who was paid $17 million by Baltimore last year, is here for $1.5 million. Billy Perez, who was paid a lot more than that by Chicago, is here for $4 million.

The biggest contracts went to two starting pitchers, Dan Gonzalez for one year and $10 million and Ryan Wallace for one year and $7.5 million. Gonzalez was worth 3.4 wins for Phoenix last year, and on a one-year deal he is a man who could be somewhere else next spring.

Here is the arithmetic that explains all of it. Southland's payroll is $79.4 million against a budget of $188 million. Committed beyond this season: $17.8 million. The next-lowest club, Spokane, has about $35 million committed past 2033. Almost the whole roster comes off the books after this season.

I asked Anthony about the 11 relievers. He kept it short.

> *"To improve in any way possible," he said. "I think competing for a wild card would equate to a successful season."*

I believe about 40 percent of that, which for me is a lot. The first part is plainly true. A club that lost 96 games and gave up 881 runs can improve by signing anybody who can still lift his arm. The second part asks for about 16 more wins, since 82 got four clubs in last year, from a roster of men on one-year deals. That is

not how it usually works. Then again, nothing here has ever worked the usual way, and Emmanuel Martinez did go 16-4 last year on a club that won 66.

The real story is underneath, and it is the first real story this franchise has had in my 29 years on it. The game's Top 100 prospect list this morning has nine Southland names on it: Christian Lombera eighth, Blake Lee 19th, Jay Greenwood 28th, Steve Boettcher 40th, Zack Maurer 49th, Geoff Fawcett 53rd, Chad Brown 57th, Abdul Adel 90th and Tony Aldana 96th. Aldana is 16 and signed out of the Dominican Republic this month for $6 million. This week, with the second pick in the draft, Anthony took Arturo Lopez, a pitcher. Seven of the nine on the list are position players.

So the plan, which Anthony will explain to anyone who asks, is this. Fill the big-league roster with veterans who cost nothing past this year. Let the kids come up. Keep the money free for when they arrive. It is the first plan in my time on this beat I can describe in one paragraph.

Spring went 16-15 with four ties. Last summer I watched two of the farm clubs win their divisions. I watched the big-league club lose 96. Both happened to the same organization in the same year, which had never happened here before.

The season opens in Milwaukee, then Huron. Most of the men in the dugout tonight will be gone by next spring. That is the plan, and for once I can tell you what the plan is.