GRAND STRAND SPORTS

MAY 23, 2033 · THE MYRTLE BEACH MERMEN BEAT

Mermen hold first in the Fire; Cripps lost for year

BY **CRICKET HALLORHAN** · GRAND STRAND SPORTS

First place. Still.

The Mermen are 29-19 this morning, first in the Ruby by a game over Phoenix, and the best record in the whole Fire Conference. Put that on the fridge.

It started with nine straight wins. San Diego here, then sweeps in Mexico City and Oahu. By May 7 the club was 25-10.

Then a wobble. Since then it's 4-9, including two losses in Virginia and three of four in Milwaukee. Three wins in the last 10. I'm not panicking. I am watching.

In April I asked Daryl if this is the window. He kept it short.

> *"Simply put, Yes!"*

Here's the best part of the team, and it isn't close: the bullpen. Its earned run average is 2.56, the best in baseball.

Steven Alexander is the closer. He has 13 saves, tied for the most in the league, a 1.17 earned run average and 38 strikeouts in 23 innings. He has not allowed a home run. I asked Daryl in April if Alexander was the closer for the long haul.

> *"100% will be in a Merman uniform for awhile."*

Good, because the bullpen just lost its biggest name. Kenny Cripps, who saved 35 games last year and was pitching in front of Alexander this year, 4-0 with a 2.79, is hurt and will miss the rest of the season. It's the last year of his contract. I hate this one.

Kevin Lindroth has a 2.05 and has not allowed a home run. D.J. Carr has a 1.56. Dan Jones, 24, had a 0.57 before he got hurt too.

The rotation is Mark Christensen, Robby Ayala, and then questions. Christensen, the $46 million signing, is 5-2 with a 2.82 and has walked nine men in 67 innings. Ayala has a 2.74. Miguel Sanchez, the one-year signing from Big Horn, is 4-3 with a 6.00 and 21 walks in 39 innings. Chris Breuninger has a 4.82.

The bats are third in the league in runs. Israel Flores has 37 runs batted in, third in baseball. Rodolfo Pintasilgo is hitting .293 with 33. Bill Sanchez, 23, has 10 home runs. Trent Erickson has eight, with 15 steals. Jesse Hile has nine.

And the catcher. In March I said that was the hole. Julian Samaniego has played 41 games and is hitting .207. Still the hole.

Here's a fun one. Willie Martinez, the man who was the Most Valuable Player of last year's final for San Juan, signed here two days into the season for the minimum. He's hitting .278 with 10 steals.

The farm, because you know I can't skip it. Erik Fisher is seventh on the game's Top 100 and is at Triple-A San Antonio, where this club used to live. Greg Mullins is 19th, up from 24th. Melvin Batres is 38th. Lear Eichhorn is new on the list at 59th.

Virginia here for two. Then four in San Juan, and Willie goes back to the Humidor. That's the week I'd buy a ticket for.