SOUTHLAND TRIBUNE

MAY 23, 2033 · THE SOUTHLAND MASKED BANDITS BEAT

Bandits drop 21 of 29 after 14-5 start

BY **GERALD MABRY** · SOUTHLAND TRIBUNE

On April 18 the Southland Masked Bandits were 14-5. They had swept Milwaukee on Opening Day weekend and swept the champions in San Juan. I wrote the record down and then I put the pen away, because in 29 years on this beat I have learned not to stare at a thing like that for too long. A week later they were still tied for first in the Topaz.

It did not help. Since that day the club is 8-21. It was swept in Memphis. It was swept in Phoenix this week, four games, and has lost five straight. It is 22-26, seventh in the Topaz, six games behind Huron and two games short of the last playoff spot in the Fire Conference.

Here is the strange part, and with this franchise there is always a strange part. Southland is 14-13 against teams with winning records. Against teams with losing records it is 4-9. It beats the good clubs and loses to the bad ones. I have no explanation for that. I have a theory, but my editor has asked me to keep it out of the paper.

In March Anthony said a wild card race would make this a successful season. Two games out on the 23rd of May is a wild card race. I believe about 40 percent of what Anthony tells me, and so far this one is holding up better than that.

The pitching has kept it there. The bullpen has a 3.43 earned run average, 10th in the league. Justin Cruz, 26, a 15th-round pick, has eight saves, a 0.48 earned run average and 26 strikeouts in 18 and two-thirds innings, and he has not allowed a home run. Brock Nickerson has a 1.78. The staff has allowed 44 home runs, fifth-fewest in baseball.

The rotation has not held up its end. Emmanuel Martinez, who went 16-4 last year on a club that won 66, is 1-6 with a 4.70 on a club that has won 22. That is how this place works. Dan Gonzalez has a 3.83 and B.J. Reyna a 4.21. The starters as a group are 26th in the league.

The offense is 30th in home runs. Cam Dempsey, the catcher, has nine of the 39 in 26 games, with a .615 slugging percentage, and was player of the week in April. On April 11 Anthony sent Manny Ruiz, the third baseman, and a reliever to New York for a late pick. Two days later he signed Chris Goers, another catcher, for a year and $18 million. Goers has six home runs in 21 games. Nick Shrader is hitting .289 at shortstop. Jose Ortega, 35, signed for a year and $5 million two days into the season, is hitting .138.

Seven men are on the injured list.

The farm keeps getting better, which in Southland is the part I trust. There are 10 Southland names on the game's Top 100 this morning, one more than in March. Christian Lombera is eighth and is at Triple-A Seattle. Blake Lee is 15th, Jay Greenwood 22nd, Steve Boettcher 30th, Geoff Fawcett 34th. Tony Diaz is new on the list at 85th. Abdul Adel is 3-0 with a 2.16 at Seattle.

Two in Mexico City this weekend. Then Oahu comes in for four, then Myrtle Beach. Oahu has the worst record in the Fire Conference. Southland tends to lose to those. I would not read anything into that.