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Firebirds survive seven-game skid, return to October

BY **AUGIE SALCIDO** · ARIZONA REPUBLIC-JOURNAL

It was the last day of the season, and Robby Morales took the ball against Myrtle Beach with nothing left for Phoenix to win and a great deal left for somebody else to lose. He went six and two-thirds innings... two hits, no runs, eight strikeouts. Bryce Mosely singled in the first, and Jose Zavala came around to score, and that was the only run of the afternoon. One to nothing. Myrtle Beach still won the Ruby on a tiebreaker, and Big Horn finished level with them, and I sat in the press box thinking that the Firebirds had just made the whole division a little more interesting on their way out the door. They are not on their way out the door, as it happens. They are going to Milwaukee.

The Firebirds finished 87-75, third in the Ruby, the sixth seed in the Fire. They clinched on the first of October in Vancouver. It is the club's first October since 2031.

It nearly did not. From September 23 to September 30 the club lost seven straight, three in Big Horn, three in San Diego and the first one in Vancouver, 10-3. Three of the seven were by one run. In September I asked Brendan what happened after a 4-8 sim.

> *"And we went 10-2 in the previous sim," he said. "We had two narrow losses to Myrtle Beach which didn't help in the last sim. We need to get our act together for the final 21 games and try to make up the 5 game deficit."*

They did not make up the five. They got their act together just in time, four wins in the last five.

The summer was Brendan's. In July he told me more pieces were coming, "hopefully some pretty big names." Jason Mills came from Chicago on July 18 and hit .257 with 12 home runs and a .505 slugging

percentage after the deadline. Josh Baker came from Cincinnati the same day, made two starts, and tore a flexor tendon... and I asked Brendan in September who takes his place.

> *"It's very difficult to replace an experienced ace like Baker and that was a terrible bit of bad luck but that's baseball and you've got to carry on," he said. "We acquired Travis Nelson who is much younger (and cheaper) than Baker and we hope he can help us out. He lacks the experience of Baker but has great potential but it's just taking him a little time to settle. By the play offs he should be an integral part of our rotation."*

Nelson came on August 1, with Chicago paying half his salary and adding $2.55 million, for Phoenix's 2034 first-round pick. He made eight starts here with a 5.28. It is taking him a little time, as Brendan said. The playoffs are here now.

Tyler Holman is the one I keep coming back to. He came from Spokane on the Fourth of July with a 5.67 earned run average, and Brendan told me to look at the numbers under the numbers. In 15 starts here he went 6-4 with a 2.71 and walked 19 men in 86 and a third innings. Usami Miyamoto had a 2.76 after the deadline. Morales won 14 and lost four, and I still would like that long lunch.

The lineup hit 218 home runs, fourth in baseball. Mosely finished with 43, fifth in the league, and 105 runs batted in. Jay Seabolt, the 16th-round pick I never had on a list, hit .333 after the deadline and finished at .314 with 28 home runs. Octavio Toledo hit 33 home runs and .206, which remains its own kind of season. Juan Mujica stole 48 bases. Zavala hit in 22 straight games before Oahu stopped him in August... and for the two months after the deadline he hit .179.

Now Milwaukee. Ninety-eight wins. They took three of four from us in June. But the last time these two clubs met in October, in 2028, the first round, Phoenix won in six. I was there. I remember the heat that night more than the score.

Games 1 and 2 are in Milwaukee on the 7th and 8th. Then it comes home, where the Firebirds were 47-34. It is October in Phoenix again, and it still gets to be warm.