

SHUCKERS SET FOR REMATCH WITH LOOKOUTS

Biloxi enters 2016 looking to take extra step towards Southern League crown

By Thaddeus Krzus

BILOXI, Miss. – The 2016 regular season begins Thursday, April 7 with the first game of a five-game series that features a rematch of the 2015 Southern League Championship Series between the Biloxi Shuckers and the Chattanooga Lookouts.

The story of Biloxi's inaugural season has been well documented with the season starting off with a 54-game road trip before finally coming home to MGM Park, only to have to play a 14-inning affair with the Mobile BayBears before walking off victorious. It was the only way the first game at a new stadium after such a journey could have finished.

The Cinderella season continued as the Shuckers won the first-half of the Southern League, finishing an impressive 9.5 games in front of Mobile, and clinching a spot in the postseason.

The awards rolled in as 10 Biloxi players were named to the Mid-season All-Star team, two named to the Post-season All-Star squad, and two members taking home year-end league awards (**Jorge Lopez** – Most Outstanding Pitcher; Carlos Subero – Manager of the Year).

Six Shuckers made their way to the big leagues, with Tyler Wagner being the first on May 30.

A sweep of the Pensacola Blue Wahoos in the Southern League Semifinals gave the team momentum going into the championship series against the Lookouts.

The slipper was on the foot, but didn't fit quite right, however, as the miracle season came to an end against Chattanooga in a championship series that went the distance.

A bullpen that had been incredibly reliable throughout the entirety of the regular season could not hold a two-run lead in Game 4 with the Shuckers up 2-1 in the series, as the Lookouts put up four runs in the sixth and evened the set.

Lopez took the hill in Game 5 and surrendered three runs in the first three innings, and Biloxi was eventually shutout, 4-0, in the clincher.

How does this shape up opening the 2016 season against the very team that ripped destiny away from the Shuckers?

For starters, Biloxi has two holdovers in their rotation from that 2015 series with the Lookouts in lefty Josh Hader and righty Adrian Houser, both of which were acquired in a deadline deal with the Houston Astros for outfielder Carlos Gomez and right-handed pitcher Mike Fiers.

Hader started Game 4 of the Championship Series against Chattanooga before being lifted with two on and one out in that four-run frame for the Lookouts.

His record may not have been pretty in his time with the Shuckers, being that he only won one game in seven starts, but his ERA sat at 2.79, and the southpaw struck out 50 in 38.2 innings of work. A pure example as to why wins and losses are overrated.

At just 21-years-old, Hader has a sub-3.00 ERA in four years of professional baseball, spanning over 360 innings, with 398 strikeouts. With a fastball that sits in the low to mid-90s, and a delivery that likens a comparison to Chicago White Sox ace Chris Sale, Hader could see a jump to the Triple-A level this season, and possibly Milwaukee.

Houser will start the third game of the season, and also started Game 2 of the Championship Series, a 6-1 loss.

The 23-year-old from Locust Grove, Okla. performed well for the Shuckers down the stretch in 2015, posting an ERA of 2.92 in 37 innings, not including a nine-inning shutout of the Blue Wahoos in Game 2 of the Divisional Round.

A knock on Houser may be that he's only had an ERA under four just once in his minor league career (2013). If he can continue the course he set in Biloxi, the 6'4" righty should see another jump to Milwaukee in 2016.

Houser was one of the six Biloxi players that saw time up in the majors, working two scoreless-innings of relief for the Milwaukee Brewers.

The remaining three starting pitchers for the Shuckers include: righties Javi Salas (game two) and Jorge Ortega (game five), and lefty Wei-Chung Wang (game four).

Salas dominated the Florida State League in the first half of 2015, putting up a 2.41 ERA in 12 games (11 starts).

The wheels came off in the second half of the season, as the Coral Gables, Fla. native's ERA jumped up to 6.50 in the same amount of games.

The 24-year-old is not known for his flashy numbers, compiling just 121 punchouts in 187.2 innings in two years. If he can even out his splits, the 6'4" hurler could be a "Houser 2.0" in the rotation.

The most intriguing pitcher looks to be Ortega.

Through 439 innings, the 22-year-old has issued just 55 walks. Think about that number for a second. That equates to a free pass to roughly once every eight innings.

However, when you look at his career average against, it's .261. As the stats show, his WHIP is greatly reduced because of the low walk rate, but he's not untouchable.

This is due partly to the fact that Ortega will not rack up strikeouts. In those 439 innings, opponents have gone down on strikes just 260 times. He can put up good strikeout games, as he posted five or more five times in 2015, but he relies heavily on locating his pitches and using the defense behind him.

Ortega could still be successful without having fantasy numbers, as many pitchers have had long careers without lighting up the radar gun.

Wang, a former Rule 5 pick in 2013, has time as a reliever at the big league level, but has been used primarily as a starter in the minors.

A native of Taiwan, the lefty is just two games above .500 in three seasons at 13-11, but has a respectable 3.23 ERA.

The bullpen features five arms who return for a second stint in Biloxi: right-handers Jaye Chapman, Drew Gagnon and Martin Viramontes, and lefties Jed Bradley and Hobbs Johnson.

Johnson shifts to a reliever spot after spending the last two seasons as a starter in the Brewers' system.

2015 saw the North Carolina native suffer his worst season as a professional, as the southpaw went 7-8 with a 3.84 ERA in 25 starts, seven of which he failed to make it to the fifth inning, with only six featuring more than five innings of work.

Command eluded the 24-year-old, as Johnson issued 71 walks in 114.2 innings.

Despite all of those numbers, the 5'11" hurler finished third in the Southern League in opponents batting average, holding the opposition to just a .219 mark, tying a career low.

Bradley, a former first-round pick out of Georgia Tech, was hit hard up in Colorado Springs, suffering through a .388 average against at the Triple-A level, leading to an ERA of exactly 9.00.

In his time with Biloxi, Bradley saw an improvement in his numbers. Through 32.2 innings, the lefty still had opponents hit .242 against him, but he saw his strikeouts rise from 15 in Colorado, to 31 in Mississippi.

Chapman provides veteran leadership in the 'pen, having pitched nine seasons at the minor league level, one year in independent ball, and a 14 appearances in the majors.

The 28-year-old dominated the Southern League in 2015, holding opponents to a .173 average and striking out 21 in 22 innings, all while having an ERA of just 0.82.

Look for Chapman to start the year out in the closer's role, as he collected 15 saves in 18 opportunities after being promoted to Colorado Springs in 2015.

Viramontes took a step back in 2015 after a solid year in Brevard County in 2014.

The native of Fresno, Calif. labored through a first half to forget, posting an ERA over 8.00 in 16 games.

He did show glimpses of dominance in the second half, but still struggled to keep opponents off the board with an ERA over 5.00.

The high marks were due to command issues that saw opponents hit .307 off the righty and put up a WHIP of 1.82.

Gagnon got off to a rough start at the Triple-A level in 2015, dropping 11 of 20 games (18 starts) for the Sky Sox before joining Biloxi.

Righty Tristan Archer and lefty Steve Peterson join Biloxi after spending 2015 in Brevard County, with both putting up respectable numbers at the High-A level.

Archer, 25, appeared in 28 games (two starts) last season, but tossed 71 innings, striking out 63 along the way.

Peterson, 28, came on in relief in 29 games and held lefties to a .203 average.

The final man in the bullpen is Daniel Tillman, a 27-year-old righty from Live Oak, Fla. In six professional seasons, Tillman has appeared in 215 games (five starts), with 39 of those coming at the Double-A level.

How are the Shuckers going to score runs this year?

If the two exhibition games are any indicator to how new manager Mike Guerrero is going to set his lineup, spectators are going to love how the first three slots click.

Returning members Kyle Wren, Nathan Orf and Brett Phillips fill the first third and provide the on-base and slugging needed to put up early runs.

Wren, 24, hit .300 in a Shuckers' uniform last year before being promoted to Triple-A and led the team with 20 stolen bases.

Orf, 26, has a career on-base percentage of .382 in three seasons and has scored 65 or more runs in each of the last two years.

Phillips, 21, has a career slugging percentage of .487 in four years, but does strike out a bit with 295 over 345 games.

The rest of the lineup may just end up being Guerrero drawing names out of a hat.

The outfield is stacked with talent in 2016 with Phillips, Wren, Victor Roache and Tyrone Taylor. There are only three outfield spots, with four highly-qualified players to fill those rolls.

Wren is locked in at batting leadoff, and Phillips is set on being in center. That only leaves one spot for Roache and Taylor. With only 20 games in the first half featuring the designated hitter, there are only so many at-bats to go around for the outfield.

The case for Roache, 24, is that he's averaged just over 19 homeruns in his three years as a professional. However, he goes down on strikes at an alarming rate, with 433 in 371 games.

Taylor is coming off a down year that saw him hit .260, but his defense may help him find more time as a starter in 2016, as the 22-year-old has committed just 10 errors in 862 total chances through his career.

Behind the plate should see newly-acquired Jacob Nottingham receiving the balls and strikes from the pitching staff on a routine basis.

Milwaukee sent outfielder Kris Davis to the Oakland Athletics for Nottingham and right-handed pitching prospect Bubba Derby.

Nottingham, 21, is coming off a monster season at the A level in which he mashed 17 long balls and drove in 82 at the age of 20.

Parker Berberet returns for his second stint in Biloxi. 2015 saw limited action for the 26-year-old, as the backstop appeared in just 53 games.

Rene Garcia rounds out the catchers. The 26-year-old comes over from the Philadelphia Phillies' organization that saw him hit .318 in 52 games combined between Double and Triple-A.

The infield will see another position battle take place throughout the first half.

Left-handed batter Nick Ramirez and righty Garrett Cooper return to Biloxi to man first base.

Cooper, 25, provides extra flexibility with the ability to play the outfield, whereas Ramirez has only played first in his entire career.

Ramirez, 26, also provides more pop at the dish, with 79 homeruns in five seasons, compared to Cooper's 18 in three years.

Where Cooper has an edge at the plate is that he has hit at every level, posting a career average of .292. Ramirez's career average is just .248.

Look for both players to platoon in the righty/lefty matchups against starting pitchers until one of them takes control of the situation.

The main man at third looks to be Brandon Macias, but could split time with Orf to provide more playing time at second for Chris McFarland.

Macias, 27, hit just .245 in 102 games while in Biloxi in 2015. If he gets off to a slow start, look for the lineup to feature Orf at third and McFarland at second.

McFarland, 23, appeared in a league-leading 137 games at Brevard County in 2015 and ranked second in hits with 150. He can also swipe bags, tallying 50 in the last two seasons.

Javier Betancourt comes to town after being acquired in a trade with the Detroit Tigers that saw the Brewers ship out closer Francisco Rodriguez.

At just 20-years-old, Betancourt has big shoes to fill as he replaces Orlando Arcia at shortstop.

Nick Shaw, 27, enters his sixth professional season and third consecutive at the Double-A level.

With Subero up in the majors as a coach for the Brewers, he's replaced by former Brewers' first base coach Guerrero, who has a career .536 winning percentage at the minor league level (12 seasons).

Biloxi also returns pitching coach Chris Hook, who coached for the North American team in the 2015 All-Star Future's Game, and coach Sandy Guerrero.

With seven of the Brewers top-30 prospects (*Baseball America*) starting the 2016 season on the Shuckers' roster, and 18 players coming back to Biloxi, Milwaukee's Double-A squad has the experience, leadership and skillset to complete a run at the Southern League crown.