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2014 RECAP BY ALEX COHEN

Even before the 2014 Pioneer League season began, the players that comprised the Idaho Falls Chukars roster had the task of all tasks staring them in the face as they stepped into the Melaleuca Field home clubhouse for that first time.

Just to equal the success of previous regime in 2013, the Chukars players would have achieved something that has never happened in Idaho Falls. Back-to-back championships.

While the bid for a possible Pioneer League dynasty came up short, there were plenty of highlights in a campaign that featured a playoff chase that came down to the final weekend of regular season play.

Featured group that had a big leaguer, a former first-round draft pick and a league-high five postseason All-Stars, Ryan O'Hearn stood out from the pack and put a stamp on one of the best individual seasons in the seven decade history of Idaho Falls baseball.

Selected in the 8th round of the 2014 MLB Draft by the Royals out of Sam Houston St., O'Hearn came to Idaho Falls midway through the first series. For O'Hearn, it only took one game, five hits and a homer in his first at-bat as a professional baseball player to take a lead in the Pioneer League MVP race that he would not relinquish.

By season's end, O'Hearn became the first Chukars player to earn the Ralph Nellis Award since Clint Robinson in 2007. In addition to leading his team in every category from runs batted in (54) and homeruns (13) to on-base percentage (.444) and walks drawn (39), the everyday first basemen was able to do even more damage on Pioneer League recordbooks in other categories. While the totals of 90 hits and 61 runs scored led all PL hitters, his batting average throughout the entire season (.362) now ranks in the 8th all-time in league history. Lastly, from a new-aged stats standpoint, O'Hearn was the only PL hitter in the last 4 years to finish with an OPS over 1.000 (1.034).

With O'Hearn leading the way, four other Chukars players in particular made their presence felt within league circles.

A college teammate of the Chukars most valuable player, shortstop Corey Toups lead Idaho Falls in doubles with 20. The Royals 15th round pick also sported a .335 batting average, which was good for sixth in the Pioneer League.

Joining the two Sam Houston St. alums, third basemen Mike Hill and outfielder Robert Pehl were also selected to the postseason all-star team. While Pehl ranked in among the top-10 Pioneer League hitters in hits (80) and batting average (.337), Hill lead the entire league with eight triples.

On the pitching side, undrafted hurler Torey Deshazier not only turned out to be the ace of the Chukars staff, but also one of the best pitchers in the entire Pioneer League. The third-year pro out of Arkansas Baptist gave up three runs or less in 12 of his 13 starts, finishing in the top-5 of all PL pitchers in ERA (3.17), wins (5) while leading the league with 66 strikeouts.

Take the all-stars out of the equation, the Chukars still found themselves with individual presences that could not go unnoticed.

While rehabbing an arm injury, former Royals first round pick and current top prospect Kyle Zimmer took his talents to Idaho Falls to get back into the rhythm of professional baseball. Six appearances and a sub-2.00 ERA (1.93) later, Zimmer left the Chukars by putting his name back on the national map and on the fast track to join the likes of Greg Holland and J.P. Howell as Chukars hurlers to make a big impact in the big league.

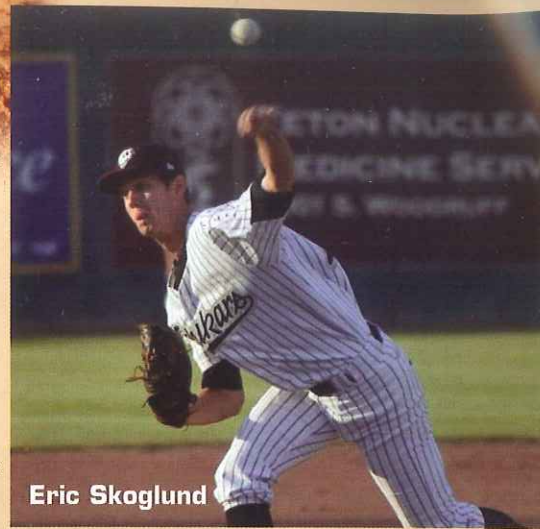
Speaking of the big leagues, fellow Idaho Falls pitcher Sugar Ray Marimon was able to complete a jump that few Pioneer league players could even dream of. Just 10 months after debuting the 2014 season in a Chukars uniform, Marimon made his debut in a big league uniform. As a member of the Atlanta Braves, Marimon took the Turner Field rubber on April 14th and tossed four innings against the Florida Marlins.

From a team standpoint, the Chukars found themselves with a big target on their collective backs all-season with a shot of defending a league title on the line.

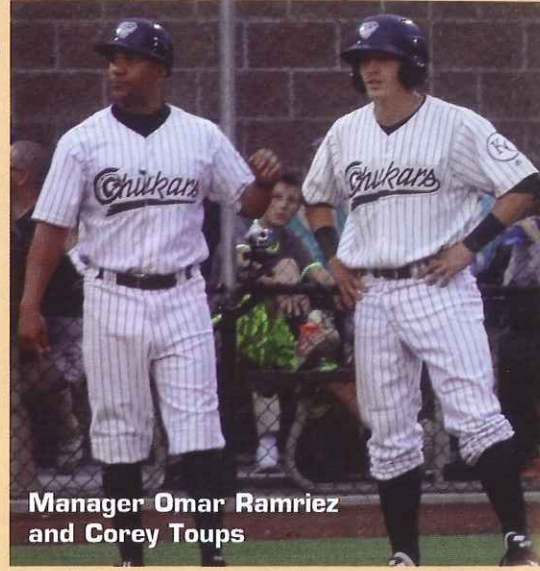
Despite the lowlight of not being able to win another ring, Idaho Falls created some fireworks of their own by going on a season-high five game winning streak during the July 4th weekend, ultimately winning seven games in eight days.

Adding to the barrage of bats, the Chukars offense also scored 26 runs in a two-game sweep of Orem in late July and ultimately won four of their last six games of the season to make their playoff push interesting, a fitting end to a season that was...

Well, interesting.



Eric Skoglund



Manager Omar Ramirez and Corey Toups



Ryan O'Hearn

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Royal CHUKARS



Salvador Perez

For those who may not know, nine former Idaho Falls Chukars played a role in leading the Kansas City Royals to within one game of winning the World Series during their first playoff appearance since the Reagan administration.

In regards to that improbable playoff push, six of those individuals (politely excluding pitchers Aaron Brooks and Michael Mariot as well as outfielder Lane

Adams) were on the postseason roster, which is comprised of just 25 players. That means nearly a fourth of the Royals talent during those cold October nights of glory at Kauffman stadium began their initial trek to professional stardom in a zip code that reads "83402".

Furthermore, that road to near baseball immortality would be a near-statistical impossibility without the contributions of



Danny Duffy

Continued on page 52

those six players.

Starting with the long ball, former Chukars accounted for 50 of the 95 roundtrippers for the Royals throughout the regular season. Taking Alex Gordon's team-leading 19 homers out of the equation, the next four hitters who totaled the most homeruns all played their home games at some point in Idaho Falls.

In fact, Salvador Perez (17 homers), Mike Moustakas (15 homers), Billy Butler and Eric Hosmer (both with 9 homers) also accounted for 248 runs batted in, 213 runs scored, 106 doubles and a grand total of 532 hits during the Royals regular season slate. The common denominator out of those players was that were lucky enough to don a Chukars uniform at one point of their storied minor league careers.

On the pitching side, both Greg Holland and Danny Duffy once upon a time played their home games at Melaleuca Field. Come full circle to 2014, the two totaled 10 wins and 46 saves during a regular season that saw the Royals make the playoffs by just two games. In the postseason, the two made a combined 14 appearances in 12 of the 15 games, going 1-0 with seven saves as a tandem.

As a collective unit, both the pitchers and position players have played integral roles into making the Kansas City Royals an organization to be reckoned with for the foreseeable future.

Before signing with the Oakland Athletics as a free agent this past offseason, Billy Butler was the backbone of a young Royals nucleus for the better part of a decade. During his nine seasons in Kansas City, the man better known as "Country Breakfast" played more than 150 games during a span of six consecutive years and was the Royals lone representative in the 2012 Major League All-Star game at Kauffman Stadium. Eight years prior to that, Butler was a 18-year-old, newly-signed, first-round draft pick who led the Chukars in hits (97) while earning two-thirds of the Pioneer League Triple crown by leading the league in batting average (.368) and sharing league crown in RBI (68).

As the only other position player to make an All-Star team in this group, Salvador Perez also has the distinction of being the only player in this collection of former Chukars to wear the aforementioned uniform for more than one



Mike Moustakas and Eric Hosmer

season. Before earning the last two gold-glove awards in the American League as a catcher, Perez played 71 combined games with Idaho Falls from 2008-09. The undrafted free agent from Venezuela went from spending 14 games as the youngest Chukars player in his first season to hitting over .300 in the first 59 games of the 2009 Pioneer League season before being promoted to Single-A Burlington to finish out the year.

A teammate of Perez during his first season, Eric Hosmer lived up to his lofty expectations during a brief stint in Idaho Falls. In one series with the Chukars, the third overall pick in the 2008 MLB Draft hit .364 in 11 at-bats with two doubles and two runs batted in. Over that three-game stretch, the face of the Royals for the 2014 playoffs also drew three walks in 15 plate appearances, meaning he ultimately got on base more than half the times he stepped to the plate (.533 on-base percentage).

One season before, Mike Moustakas came into Idaho Falls as another young phenom looking to get his first games as a professional baseball player under his belt. As the second overall pick in the 2007 MLB draft, the owner of one of the most clutch homeruns in Royals history (See: Game 1, ALDS) hit .293 in 11 contests with the Chukars, nearly totaling as many runs batted in as games played with 10.

Being one of the few unheralded

prospects of this group of half-dozen, Greg Holland may have put his name on the proverbial map during his time with the Chukars. In 2007, the two-time AL all-star came into Idaho Falls as a 10th round draft pick from Western Carolina University. In his first pro season, Holland led the team in both wins (6) and saves (6), helping guide Idaho Falls to a Pioneer League South league crown.

Aside from Holland, Danny Duffy is the only other former player of this list to factor into bringing a Pioneer League South divisional title to Idaho Falls. In his fourth professional baseball season at the time, the former top-100 prospect in all of minor league baseball gave up just one run in two starts with the Chukars as one of his four stops within the Royals system in 2010. Duffy reached the big leagues exactly one year after and has been there for the most part ever since.

Unfortunately, not every player who sports a Chukars uniform will go on to play in the big leagues. Of the harsh realities encompassed in America's Pastime, that is one of many. Those who do and those who don't, their futures align and start at a common point in Idaho Falls and other places around the Pioneer league. If this past year in baseball was any indication though, the future becomes the present awfully quickly.

All you have to do is come to Melaleuca Field to embrace it.