

CASPER GHOSTS HAVE AT LEAST A "GHOST" OF A CHANCE IN 2009

BY: ANTHONY J. SACCO © APRIL 2009

PINE BLUFFS – When the *Casper Ghosts* take the field to open their 2009 season against the *Idaho Falls Chukars*, fans will be treated to a new General Manager, an upgraded Mike Lansing Park, exciting promotions, and innovative community outreach endeavors throughout the summer. But the burning question will still be the same: can this team win the league championship or even a division title?

Will the 2009 talent be an improvement over the 2008 squad? That bunch finished third in the South Division, with a so-so record of 36 wins and 37 losses. While not that bad, it was enough to put some *Ghost's* fans into a deep funk. Real baseball fans will understand what I mean.

But this season, things *could* get interesting and even exciting. Especially if you consider that these boys of summer are here for just one reason: to eventually make the majors. For them, it isn't very serious, just the threshold of their whole careers.

As with many minor circuits throughout the country, the Pioneer Rookie League divides its season into two halves. There's a winner for each 38-game half, and a playoff for the league championship in September. The Cape Cod League in Massachusetts and the Carolina League in the southeast are two other leagues that use this system. The *Ghosts* did not win either half in '08. Not even close.

Here's how last year's Pioneer League teams finished:

NORTH DIVISION:

Billings Mustangs	42	34	.568	-
Great Falls Voyagers	39	37	.513	4.0
Helena Brewers	35	41	.461	8.0
Missoula Osprey	21	56	.280	21.5

SOUTH DIVISION:

Orem Owlz	52	23	.693	-
Ogden Raptors	42	33	.560	10.0
Casper Ghosts	36	37	.493	15.0
Idaho Falls Chukars	33	43	.434	19.5

In '08, eighteen-year old Catcher, Wilin Rosario's stats were very impressive among the position players. He led the *Ghosts* in home runs with twelve. Not too bad in a league where the home run leader slugged only 15 the entire season. Rosario's on base percentage was .371, his slugging average .532, his RBI total was 49, and his batting average ended up at .316. That's 83 hits in 263 trips to the plate—good enough for a team sixth, and seventh in the league. Possessed of a "gun" for an arm, he threw out

46% of base runners attempting to steal on his pitchers. Trust me, that's super for a catcher at any level.

Last summer, the team's pitching ace was right-hander, Dan Houston. A Boston College grad, Dan turned in a team tops six wins. With sixty-eight strike outs in sixty-nine innings, and an ERA of 4.17, he ranked 9th in the League's ERA race.

Will either Rosario or Houston be in a *Ghosts* uniform for 2009? On April 10, I interviewed the team's new General Manager, Mike Sandler, by e-mail. "Neither will be," he said. "They've both been promoted for the 2009 season. Dan will be with the Asheville Tourists of the South Atlantic League and Wilin will be behind the plate for the Modesto Nuts of the California League. Both were bright spots in the *Ghosts* lineup last year and are sure to be big additions to their respective lineups." See? In the minors, if you have a good season, you can expect to move up a notch.

Mike Lansing Field is named after Wyoming native and former major league second baseman, Mike Lansing, a career .271 hitter who played nine years in the majors for the *Montreal Expos*, *Colorado Rockies*, and *Boston Red Sox*. The *Ghosts* showcase their talents Monday through Saturday at 7:05 pm, and Sundays at 5:05 pm at the park, which is located on Kati Lane, next to the North Platte River, just south of the Casper Events Center. Built in 2001 to hold 2,500 rabid baseball fans, the first game ever played there took place on Opening Day 2002.

This year, the *Ghosts*, an advanced Rookie League affiliate of the National League's *Colorado Rockies* [the other affiliates are AAA - Colorado Springs Skysox, AA - Tulsa Drillers, A - Modesto Nuts, A - Asheville Tourists, and A - Tri-City Dust Devils], begin play away from home on June 23, hosted by the *Chukars*. 76 games later, our guys close out the summer at home on September 11 against the same team.

Ghosts manager, Tony Diaz, has been with the team since 2001. According to GM Mike Sandler, "he spent his first 6 years as hitting coach and this will be his 3rd [year] as the team's manager."

Craig Bjornson will be this year's pitching coach. According to Mike, Craig is in his first year with the outfit, having ". . . come over from the Dodgers organization."

Glancing at the nicknames of the teams in this league, I don't think the politically correct crowd will ever lodge a complaint against a team for choosing an appellation it considers "offensive." All except two will carry names of animals or bird; one will take the name of beer makers, and the Casper team will sport its new brand, "*Ghosts*," for only the second year, after spending seven as the *Casper Rockies*. The *Chukars* take their name from a South Asian partridge introduced into the American west as a game bird.

In June, the *Ghosts* will showcase its new General Manager Mike Sandler, who took over the reigns in October 2008. Actually, Mike has been with the *Ghosts* since 2007 when he began his career as an intern. He's a native of Portland, Maine and a graduate of Roanoke College in Virginia, where he played tennis. During my e-mail interview in April,

Mike told me, "I did not play baseball at Roanoke . . . got into baseball more out of passion for the business end rather than the sport."

In a March 2009 interview with *Ghostsbaseball.com*, Mike took a few minutes to expound on what his first six months running a minor league baseball team has been like: "There certainly are a lot of challenges and a lot of things on your plate at one time, but all in all it is about as fun a job as anyone could ask for," he said.

What else will be new this June? Sandler again: "Brandon White has taken over as our new Director of Ticket sales and Chris Maxwell, who was our PA announcer last year, will also be our Director of Community Relations. Brandon has implemented a new season ticket holder referral plan called Operation 900, where new and old season ticket holders have a chance to win a trip to Phoenix in the fall to see the [Colorado] *Rockies* play. Chris has been working with local non-profits, helping to expand our role as a partner in community development. We also have a new cleaning crew from Monson Janitorial and we extended our partnership with Central Landscaping to really spruce up the ballpark this year."

General admission seats are a very reasonable \$7.50 (adults) and \$6.50 (seniors/children). Reserved seating costs \$9.00. For tickets, call 307-232-1111. Fans can also purchase a dynamite season ticket plan. For only \$220.50, you can pick up a ticket to every regular season home game, as well as admission to batting practice sessions and those fantastic BBQ's. You'll also be given priority to purchase home playoff game seats, should lightning strike.

But will it? In my e-mail interview with Sandler on April 10, I asked him to evaluate the 2009 team: "To be completely honest," he said, "I have no idea. The team has not been named, and much of last year's team has been promoted, so we will have to wait and see how it works out. My hope is for a strong outing for the people of Casper."

On paper this new crop of rookies looks good. If the pitchers step up, if the position players play great defense and get some timely hits, "a strong outing" is a reasonable expectation. In any event, a baseball game at Mike Lansing Field with the entire family is a wonderful way to spend a summer evening.

See ya at the ballpark!

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